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## Persistent Pedestrianism: The 'Tour Book' as an Enduring Form of Children's Instructional Literature

M. O. Grenby

You may recently have noticed in your local bookshop some tables full of large-format children's picturebooks, each promising to take the reader on a tour around a major city. There's Salvatore Rubbino's *A Walk in London* for example, its publication nicely timed to coincide with the London 2012 Olympics (though it was preceded by *A Walk in New York* and has now been followed now by *A Walk in Paris*). And there are reissues of Miroslav Sasek's classic *This is...* books, which began with *This is Paris* in 1958 and progressed to London (1959), Rome (1960), New York (1960), Hong Kong (1965) and a dozen or so other destinations, until his grand tour finished with *This is Historic Britain* in 1974.

Sasek's books are undeniably charismatic, with concise, eager text ('There are ten thousand streets in London. When in doubt about how to get to one of them, ask a policeman.') and crowded, kinetic illustrations ('In exciting pictures in the modern style Here is London!'). The successful twenty-first-century reissue of the whole series owes much to their retro appeal: the rather flat images in muted colours. Rubbino's books trade on the same aesthetic. His images are distinctly low-tech, their texture, palette, two-dimensionality and style establishing an aesthetic that seems deliberately opposed to the digital imagery of the smartphone era. His city has changed very little from Sasek's. Even if modern landmarks make an appearance – the London Eye, say – London is still friendly bobbies patrolling the streets, red double-decker buses, sudden showers forcing people to scurry along under their black umbrellas, and all the familiar sights. 'London – the perfect place for a girl and her mother to spend the day!' says the blurb, and we are invited to 'Follow them as they board the classic red bus and begin a whirlwind tour of some of London's most iconic landmarks.' Little, it seems, has changed from the 1950s to the 2010s.

In fact, little has changed since the 1740s.

The middle of the eighteenth century was when children's literature as we know it began. A few recognisably modern children's books had been published earlier, but it was in London, in the 1740s, that a critical mass was achieved. A triumvirate of publishers was at the core of this: Thomas Boreman, Mary Cooper and John Newbery. What is remarkable is that, among their first ventures into publishing for young people, they all produced children's guides to sites of historical interest not at all dissimilar to Sasek's and Rubbino's.

From Boreman's shop at the Guildhall came a series of tiny books called, with deliberate irony, the *Gigantick Histories*. The first, in two volumes, was *The Gigantick History of the Two Famous Giants, and Other Curiosities in Guildhall* (1740). Then came *The Curiosities of the Tower of London* (1741), *The History and Description of the Famous Cathedral of St. Paul's* (1741) and *The History and Description of Westminster Abbey* (1742-43). Here, in small print accompanied by miniature woodcuts, Boreman set out the chief attractions and curiosities of each place, and their architectural splendours.

A few years later, John Newbery was offering much the same, though in larger format and at greater length, in his *Historical Account of the Curiosities of London and Westminster* written by David Henry. From 1753 it appeared in numerous editions, both as a single volume and in its three constituent parts (the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, and St. Paul's Cathedral). Evidently it was a successful formula, for both of Newbery's contending

successors – Francis his son and Francis his nephew – brought out similar works: a guide to *Windsor, and its Environs* (1768) from the son, ‘containing the curiosities of the town and palace, the Royal chapel of St. George, and the seats in the neighbourhood’, and a much expanded, better illustrated and more child-friendly *Curiosities of London and Westminster Described* (1770) from the nephew, including sights like the Bank of England, the British Museum, Bethlem, Bridewell and the Foundling Hospital.

As for Mary Cooper, from her shop could be had probably the most daring of these guidebooks (if that is what they are): *The Travels of Tom Thumb over England and Wales*, which appeared in 1746. Here children were being shown curiosities and splendours from far beyond London (though London also features), all in the appealing company of Tom Thumb, newly retired from his adventures with giants, his exploits at King Arthur’s court, and his passage through a cow’s digestive system. ‘After the many strange Adventures of my Youth, and the many Perils and Dangers I had escaped,’ he explains, ‘one would have thought I should have been very glad to have spent the Remainder of my Days at Home in Ease and Safety’. But, he says, ‘Ambition, and the Love of my Country, excited me to undertake the vast Design of travelling to distant Counties, and viewing all the Cities, Towns, and remarkable Places in the whole Kingdom of *England*, and the Principality of *Wales*.’ Tom’s tour would map neatly onto many modern itineraries. He marvels at the colleges in Oxford, wonders at Stonehenge, pays homage at Shakespeare’s grave, enjoys a visit to Warwick Castle and inspects ‘the Ruins of the famous *Pict’s Wall*’ – we now call it Hadrian’s Wall – built, he says, ‘in order to restrain the Northern People, who have always been very troublesome to those of the South’ (the Jacobite invasion launched from Scotland had been repulsed only a few months before publication).

It would be no exaggeration I think to say that these ‘tour books’, as I call them, formed one of the foundation stones of modern children’s literature. And what Boreman, Cooper and Newbery began, many others continued. Over the decades dozens, perhaps hundreds, of inventive and talented authors, illustrators and publishers turned their hands the children’s tour book, with the result that they have appeared in a variety of formats, with many different frame narratives employed to justify the travels. From the quite staid London tours of the later eighteenth century emerged more affable guides like *Instructive Rambles in London* (by Elizabeth Helme, 1798), *A Visit to Uncle William in Town, or a Description of the Most Remarkable Buildings and Curiosities of the British Metropolis* (1818) and *London Sights for Little Folks* (c.1835). More gimmicky titles were emerging by the mid-nineteenth century: Henry Mayhew and George Cruikshank’s *1851: Or the Adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys and Family who came up to London to enjoy themselves and to see the great exhibition* (1851), for instance, or *Puck and Peasblossom in London*, a Routledge toybook from 1858. Few parts of the country were left untoured. A child of the mid-nineteenth century might enjoy Louisa Weston’s *The Cambrian Excursion, Intended to Inculcate a Taste for the Beauties of Nature* (1826), or Reuben Ramble’s *Travels in the Western Counties of England* by Samuel Clark (1845), or George Mogridge’s *Loiterings around the Lakes of Cumberland* (1849). Other titles, like Isaac Taylor’s series of books for ‘tarry-at-home travellers’ – *Scenes in Europe* (1818), *Scenes in Asia* (1819), *Scenes in Africa* (1820) and so on – expanded children’s horizons still further. By the twentieth century tour books were giving global coverage. Their pictures were also steadily coming to dominate over their text.

Much more striking than any changes in the format and purview of the tour book, however, are the continuities. New sights are added to the roster, but the basic itineraries remain

familiar, as do the descriptions of what heritage professionals now call the 'historic built environment'. 'Those who first visit *London* seldom fail of going up St. Paul's, where they take notice of the famous whispering Gallery', says Tom Thumb in the 1746 book. Quite so. Boreman had given meticulous detail: 'the first two hundred and sixty are so exceedingly easy, that a child might go up them', he writes of the ascent of St Paul's dome. And having ascended,

you will be ask'd to see the whispering-gallery, which will cost *Two-pence each person*. This gallery is a very great curiosity: ... leaning your head against the wall, you may easily hear all that is said, though it be ever so low, and at the most distant place from you in the gallery: which affords great matter of surprize and innocent diversion to all young persons who come to amuse themselves with this curiosity.

Robbino's 2011 account differs merely by a single step: 'There are 259 steps up to the Whispering Gallery', he relates. But his young tourist would certainly agree that the gallery 'affords great matter of surprize': 'Mum makes us stand in different places, then "Hello?" she whispers – and I jump! It sounds as if she's right behind me.'

That Boreman and Robbino both gave a count of the number of steps to the whispering gallery is a significant marker of the continuities across three centuries. Such empiricism – observing, surveying, ascertaining – was the underlying principle of the travel literature of the eighteenth century. While 'ancient travellers guessed; modern travellers measure', as Samuel Johnson put it. Robbino abides by Johnson's rule. 'Over a thousand trees grow in St James's Park' he tells his readers. Admittedly there is a little imprecision here, but Robbino makes up for it with his scrupulous corroboration of the fact that 'London is Europe's third rainiest city': 'About 580 millimetres of rain falls here every year' he notes, impressed rather than dispirited.

Much else remains has remained the same too. There is delight at the heterogeneity of the city, with specimens of its different ethnicities provided for the reader's inspection (Jews, usually, in the eighteenth century; the black London Underground ticket inspector, several ostentatiously depicted Sikhs, and 'the West African visitor' on a shopping trip in Sasek; the 'over 300 languages' spoken in London in Robbino). But perhaps the most striking continuity is the celebration of the balance between tradition and innovation on show in almost all these books. Tom Thumb in 1746, for example, is as enthusiastic about London's newly-built hospitals – Bethlem, the Foundling, and 'the magnificent New Hospital for exposed and deserted young Children, one Wing of which is already built and filled' – as he is about the ancient monuments like St. Paul's and the Tower. He talks admiringly about the works of 'our noble modern Architect the earl of *Burlington*' and says that '*Westminster* Bridge, when finished, will be the grandest Thing of the Kind in all *Europe*.' Precisely the same excitement informs the later titles. For all Sasek's revelling in London's quaint curiosities and historic landmarks, his city is full of neon, reverberates with the rush of buses, taxis and Tube trains, and is a playground for the automobile (cars whizz freely round St Paul's, and handy parking is to be found in front of the west door of Westminster Abbey). Rubbino's words and pictures likewise celebrate a constantly renewing city: 'Londoners often give new buildings on their skyline nicknames: this one is known as "the Gherkin"'. All these Londons are cheerful and flourishing, characterised by a progressive optimism founded on a secure history.

There is still much to be discovered about these children's tour books. Who read them? Who still reads them? Are they for children who have never visited the sights portrayed, nor are every likely to? (We should remember that in the eighteenth century London was impossibly remote to many Britons: Jane Austen, for instance, never visited.) Or are these publications genuine guidebooks, to be used on a real trip, or to be bought as souvenirs of a visit? Or should we think of them as designed chiefly for children who live their day-to-day lives in these places and will recognise the places described? (The listed subscribers to Boreman's books mostly reside no more than a few hundred meters from his shop at the Guildhall.) Has the purpose of the tour book changed over time, or stayed broadly the same? And what role have such books had in establishing ideas of civic and national heritage and identity? Much is left to investigate. If you decide to explore this territory, I can only suggest that, as the back-cover blurb of Robbino's book helpfully advises, you 'wear a pair of comfy shoes and stop as often as you feel like.'